

# **‘Tell me a story, dear, that is not true’: Love, Historicity, and Transience in A. Mary F. Robinson’s *An Italian Garden***

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Augusta Webster complains in her *Athenaeum* review of *An Italian Garden* (1886) that Mary Robinson’s poetry does not reflect ‘the living workaday world of men and women’. Webster goes on in the review to link Robinson’s depiction of lost love and heartbreak in this volume with her youthful, immature experience of love, suggesting that *An Italian Garden* cultivates a ‘romance of a grief’ (517). Webster’s assessment is generally accurate, for Robinson’s poetic perspective is indeed developed through grief and self-pity as she aestheticizes the pain of lost love as a positive attribute of human experience in a process that depends upon the deliberate separation of abstract sensations of love from recognizable concrete markers, such as the development of married love marked by the seasonal metaphors of aging and mortality that Webster explores in ‘English Rispetti’, for instance. Instead, the complex experience of love reflected in the androgynous quality of the poetic voice in *An Italian Garden* emphasizes the intensity of woman’s passion that transcends time, place, and gender to elevate individual feeling above social constraints. *An Italian Garden* compels the reader to enter into an aesthetic world of intimate dreams and unspoken desires to experience forbidden pleasure and inevitable pain divorced from the expectations of heterosexual marriage. In this respect, then, the usually astute Webster seems to have failed to recognize the paradox inherent in subjective perceptions of ‘real world’ experience. Robinson explains in an *Athenaeum* review of her own that ‘the delicate, romantic, exquisite unreality, so beautifully shot with passion and sentiment’ (265) is part of a long and resilient Italian tradition, and it is in this tradition, I suggest, that *An Italian Garden* reflects a very specific element of real world experience. That is, while in style and subject matter *An Italian Garden* contrasts Robinson’s earlier attempt at realism in *The New Arcadia* (1884), the later volume problematizes love and desire as compelling yet risky elements of transient human existence, and in this respect, *An Italian Garden* is poignantly realistic. The stylistic differences between the two volumes suggest that Robinson shifted from the aestheticist socialism of *The New Arcadia* to a perspective informed by the integration of aestheticism and individualism that was increasingly popular in the 1880s. Moreover, Robinson had not yet ended her intimacy with Vernon Lee when she was writing *An Italian Garden*, and this unique liaison informs the nature of love depicted in the volume. Robinson describes the rispetti as ‘the utterance of a jealous dying woman who feels herself forgotten before she is dead’, explaining that the poems were her response to Lee’s friendship with Mrs Alice Callender (quoted in Vadillo 260, n. 57). Drawing on her emotional crisis, Robinson universalizes the power of love, a power related to its transience. In this essay, I read *An Italian Garden* in the context of Robinson’s interest in Italy, in Italian poetic forms, and in Vernon Lee, interests which inform her poetic depiction of love developed within the framework of an androgynous, aestheticist, and individualistic form of human experience.

Robinson’s presentation of the experience of human love in *An Italian Garden* is consistent with the self-conscious discourse of individualism that Herbert Spencer popularized in the 1880s. Regenia Gagnier points out that Spencer’s ‘followers were called “Individualists”’, and his system rested on the idea of ‘character’, on the

concept of an individual ‘with specific habits of action of a desirable kind, inflected by gender, and associated with self-restraint, perseverance, effort, courage, self-reliance, thrift, sense of personal responsibility, duty, and so forth’ (318). As Stefan Collini explains, Spencer’s intent was that in perfecting one’s own character, one might also influence the perfection of character in others, and this process of perfection is really the business of government aiming to ensure the wellbeing of the nation (94). Individualism in Spencer’s context, then, is not based on selfishness, but rather, as Samuel Smiles defines it in *Self-Help* (1859), on selflessness, on the premise that ‘the duty of helping one’s self in the highest sense involves the helping of one’s neighbors’ (vi). As Thomas Dixon points out, this paradoxical perspective arose mainly because ‘Spencer also sought to blur the boundary between the two categories of egoism and altruism’, which further complicated the ways in which these terms were used in public discourse (199-200). Dixon argues that ‘some Victorian moralists’—and I classify Robinson as one of these—‘preferred to continue thinking about ethical life in terms not of a contrast between altruism and selfishness, but of the love of an individual for God, self, and others, or perhaps as a struggle between a virtuous rational will and troublesome passions and appetites’ (366).

Through a poetic voice compelled to recognize that individual desire is often not reciprocated and that love entails great risk that is itself ennobling, Robinson explores the nature of love that is selfless in that one gives oneself to another, yet selfish in that one comes to need a totality of love not possible in a finite context. Paradoxically, then, love evokes both pleasure and pain. Her understanding of individualism is rooted in John Locke’s argument in *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding* that the ways in which we understand the world are not innate but are the result of how we process the data we receive through our senses and in David Hume’s later and more sophisticated factoring of both memory and the collective historical past into this process in *An Inquiry Concerning Human Understanding*. Robinson’s poetic perspective specifically reflects Pater’s development of these ideas within the context of Victorian aestheticism in 1873, when he explains the concept of fragmented perceptions of beauty as a means of evaluating love, loyalty, and passion in the Conclusion to *The Renaissance*. The duality of love that Robinson presents in *An Italian Garden* is directly related to the philosophical perspective best termed aestheticist individualism.

The tension at the core of aestheticist individualism is set out clearly in the central section of *An Italian Garden* as the poet, vacillating between desire for transcendent love and conviction that human love is by definition finite and limited, pleads in the eleventh *rispetto* of ‘Tuscan Cypress’ for ‘a story, dear, that is not true’ (45).<sup>1</sup> Robinson strove to tell a ‘true’ story in *The New Arcadia*, which concerns the human tragedy of a social class living in poverty and ignorance and which was written in response to Edmund Gosse’s plea for aesthetic realism. In a letter to Gosse on 25 January 1881, Robinson explains her plans ‘to write, what you once told me to write, a modern and realistic narrative poem; for a very good subject came into my head the other day’. However, in dedicating *The New Arcadia* to Vernon Lee and in establishing the tone of her attack on aesthetic notions of the pastoral ideal through an epigraph taken from *The Duchess of Malfi*, Robinson contextualizes her plea for social change in assumptions about the lower classes that undermine individualism and suggest a collective uniformly suffering far from the world of those in a position to help them. When she presents the suffering associated with despair and loss in *An*

*Italian Garden*, Robinson also focuses on pain as a prevailing feature of the human condition; however, this time pain is related to the individual experience of love that distinguishes us from one another as human beings and that affects our perspective on all aspects of life. The dedication of 'A Ballad of Forgotten Tunes' to Vernon Lee in a section of *An Italian Garden* titled 'Songs and Dreams' not only gives Lee a presence in the volume but also, through an allusion in the poem to Lee's aestheticist interest in art and art history, problematizes the historicist act of retrieval and concludes that 'faded notes' and 'the soul that dwelt in them' are lost to future generations; however, in the larger context of *An Italian Garden*, 'A Ballad of Forgotten Tunes' emphasizes the immutable transience and impermanence of all life and underscores the unique perspective of the individual in his or her cultural, social, and political context.<sup>2</sup>

Hence, *An Italian Garden* continues the general discourse between Robinson and Lee initiated in 'A Dialogue on Poetic Morality' in *Belcaro*, which Lee dedicated to Robinson in 1881. Lee's presence in *An Italian Garden*, then, is not surprising, nor is the fact that her explicit feature in a poem dedicated to her suggests her implicit presence in a volume of poetry that articulates an aestheticist presentation of love. Robinson had known Lee intimately for six years by the time she published *An Italian Garden*, and she had spent a significant portion of that time at Lee's home in Italy. Their relationship was intense and complex, with the families of both women involved in the partnership. Robinson's relationship with Lee was founded on love that surpassed common friendship, that was spiritually and emotionally intimate, and that may or may not have been consummated sexually. Their closeness is clear in Robinson's account of her time with Lee and Lee's half-brother, Eugene Lee Hamilton, in an obituary tribute to Lee, published as 'In Casa Paget' in *Country Life* shortly after Lee's death in 1907. Emily Harrington suggests that Lee 'may have ultimately arrested Robinson's poetic development' by encouraging her to return to 'the more purely aestheticist style of her earlier work' (97). However, in essential ways Robinson's return to the purely lyrical form in *An Italian Garden* indicates her poetic development along an increasingly more sophisticated aestheticist trajectory, for in closing the social and cultural distance from her subject she tells a story that is 'true' to the intimate inner lives of those who love. In this way she incorporates into her more mature aestheticist work the principles of realism, ethical poetic responsibility, and human sympathy that she fails to bring to fruition in *The New Arcadia*. In the more personal lyric forms of *An Italian Garden*, Robinson writes about what Pater terms the 'awful brevity' of life, and in 'disguising' sexuality and passion as Italian concerns incorporated within the rich tradition of the popular Italian folk song, she successfully poeticizes the intensity of passion that transcends time, place, and gender expectations.

In short, Robinson writes as an aestheticist poet, prioritizing love within the context of transience, impermanence, and transcendence. She was developing these ideas as early as 1880 in poems such as 'Unequal Souls' and 'Lover's Silence', both published in the *Athenaeum* that year on 17 April and 11 September respectively. Therefore, she had already defined herself as an aestheticist poet when she met Lee in the fall of 1880 during a trip to Italy with her mother and her sister. As Harrington suggests, Lee influenced the direction of Robinson's life, both professionally and personally. Fanny Robinson expresses her instinctive fondness for Lee in a letter to Robinson's father on 24 October 1880, suggesting that 'if we lived in the same town I think we

might become great friends'. Her instincts were proven wrong in later years as Robinson's family found Lee difficult. However, during the early 1880s, Robinson and Lee formed an identifiable couple in London during the summer and in Florence during the fall. Robinson introduced Lee to the female poetic community of Emily Pfeiffer, Mathilde Blind, and Amy Levy, the women meeting on a regular basis at Mary Ward's home in Oxford. The socially connected Robinson was eager to facilitate Lee's less than easy integration into English society and acceptance by her increasingly large circle of literary friends. Writing to Gosse in May 1884, for instance, Robinson suggests that he might include Lee in his regular visits: 'If you want to set her a pattern of beautiful manners, come and call on her here any Tuesday or Friday!' Robinson's correspondence with Lee, with her family, and with other writers in these years indicates her loyalty to Lee, her admiration for Lee's work, and her yearning for Lee's praise. Her letters to Lee also indicate her intense personal feeling for and devotion to someone she would eventually leave in the state of pain and despair depicted in *An Italian Garden*. That Robinson recognized Lee's sexual leanings and was capable of using language to access her friend's inner self is suggested in at least one letter that is undated but that is written on Earl's Terrace letterhead, presumably, therefore, preceding her marriage to Darmesteter in 1888 and her move from the family home. Addressing Lee by her pet name Veruce, Robinson muses, 'What would my life be like without you, how dull and flat and limited: you are the comfort and the inspiration of it all'. She imagines Lee

like an arm always holding me up. My Vernon! Even to think that, if you were there, I could sit in your lap and lay my head on your shoulder and you'd say "I love you Millions"—to think of it only is such a rest. I don't know how I should live if I did not think of it. How could you think you were not necessary to me, my Love, my Hope, my Companion and Consoler. . . . You're a light and you're a rest; and you're warmth and comfort. You're all sorts of beautiful colours in my life. . . . You couldn't live without me I know, you dream of my kisses and would rather die than grieve me. So I'll go on loving you always.

Lee, of course, felt betrayed and suffered a physical and emotional breakdown upon Robinson's sudden decision to marry Darmesteter; Robinson, however, seems to have viewed her marriage as a natural development in the pattern of her life. Robinson tells Lee on 9 December 1892 about the comforts of being a married woman with clearly defined duties. More than forty years later, though, in September 1930, she reminisces to Lee about 'the nights I slept so securely in your arms', echoing with these words the simultaneous yearning for and despair of physical and emotional intimacy implicit in *An Italian Garden*, a specifically androgynous intimacy that perhaps James Darmesteter intuited as he finished reading the volume in August 1887 and shortly thereafter declared his love to Mary Robinson in preparation for their marriage in 1888.

As Harrington points out, Lee's lukewarm reception of *The New Arcadia* no doubt affected Robinson's future work, particularly since John Addington Symonds echoes Lee in his guarded praise of the book, suggesting to Robinson 24 April 1884 that she fails in 'versification' and poetic vision' (Schueller et al 907-8). This criticism is reiterated a few months later by Theodore Watts in his *Athenaeum* review of 6 August 1884. Yopie Prins discusses Robinson's lyricism in these years in the context of the

translation of *Hippolytus* in 1881, demonstrating that through her work on Euripides, Robinson was able to develop ‘a highly musical language of desire for her own poetry’ (593). The nature of this desire, suggests Prins, is implicit in ‘Hippolytus as a figure for homoerotic aestheticism, and in Phaedra as a figure for transgressive feminine desire’ (613).<sup>3</sup> Linda Ely links Robinson’s personal ‘presence’ to her poetic voice, explaining that ‘the woman, indeed, seems to become the poem’ (94). However, as Ely cautions, suggestions that the writers were ‘romantically (if not sexually) involved’ came from mid-twentieth century scholars rather than from contemporaries of Robinson and Lee (95). Indeed, the androgynous poetic voice of *An Italian Garden* evokes Lee as the ‘lover’ who, Sappho-like, prepared Robinson for the formal commitment of heterosexual marriage. We can never know whether Robinson’s childless marriages were the result of non-consummation, but as Martha Vicinus notes, Darmesteter did tell Vernon Lee that he agreed that the ‘delicate’ Robinson could not ‘tolerate’ childbearing (159). Robinson’s awareness that she had hurt Lee in marrying Darmesteter is clear in a letter of 1889, written just a year after she married: she writes to invite Lee to dinner, explaining that other guests would be present for the afternoon only, and adding cryptically, ‘perhaps for the first few minutes you would rather we were not alone’. However, she promises to ‘ask no one to dinner: after dinner James has to work’, she explains, and suggests that Lee ‘can lie on the divan and talk lazily to me’, much like an aesthete-lover come to experience a moment of intimacy with the beloved. Throughout *An Italian Garden* motifs prioritize emotional spaces within the individual where desire and its material realization intersect and produce simultaneous joy and despair much along the lines Lee may have felt at the possibilities afforded by this invitation. It is in this respect that Ely’s sense of the feminine, physical ‘presence’ of Robinson in her poetry is significant, for the majority of Robinson’s relationships, including her unique relationship with Lee, seem to have been informed by her aestheticist individualism, shaped on the one hand by her physical aesthetic and on the other hand by her poetic aesthetic, with both aesthetics developed within the context of Italian culture and tradition.

Organized into five thematic sections, *An Italian Garden* is unified by the aestheticist theme of transience—transience in love, in nature, and in life—and this thread is strengthened by its androgynous inclusiveness and by its development within the context of aestheticist individualism. In each section, despair at the tenuous nature of love, natural beauty, and, ultimately, life itself—despair that each and every aspect of human existence is finite, compelling us to enter into the life-long aim of reconciling infinite desire with finite existence—is tempered by acceptance that the joy of fulfillment, the tension of yearning, and the pain of loss contribute to an individual aesthetic that transcends limited gender expectations and social constraints. Hence, Robinson relies on the androgyny of the poetic voice to recast Spencer’s model of character within the context of an aestheticist exploration of love that celebrates transience and impermanence as defining features of human experience, and in the poems of *An Italian Garden*, she invites us to reassemble the fragmented sense perceptions of this voice into a ‘story’ that resonates as true. The arrangement of *An Italian Garden* is pertinent to this construction of desire, as we are introduced to fragmented moments specific to the secrets of the night in nocturnes, proceed through stages of response to the natural world in the central sections, and slip back into dreams and memories in the final section.

'Nocturnes' is focused by two epigraphs, the first from Sappho and the second from Shelley's 'The Witch of Atlas'. The former suggests lesbian desire and the second evokes Shelley's androgynous hermaphrodite; together, these allusions establish the parameters of the poetic celebration of physical, earthly love removed from a heterosexual context. The nocturne aestheticizes the moods of the night specified by dreams, retrospectives, and private moments, the term itself alluding in this context, perhaps, to Whistler's visual representation of perfect musical harmony. Robinson recasts this harmony in aestheticist poetry that draws on the gothic elements of the Italian 'notturmo' to precipitate the integration of awe and terror that defines the Romantic sublime, and through this trope, she conveys the paradox of desire that evokes both pain and joy. Therefore, the musicality of the lyric form is significant in that it results in the transformation of the nightmarish quality of the gothic into a cathartic poetic release. 'Florentine May', for instance, demonstrates the simultaneity of hope and disappointment: the spring freshness, purity, and renewal implicit in the title of the poem contrast the sensual and sexual process of seduction that takes place in the night as 'still as the pause after pain', the alliteration emphasizing the transitional moment of release when experience is transformed into remembrance. The conceit is developed fully at the end of the poem when the secret and erotic expressions of desire formulated deep in the psyche in this night-space are implicitly satisfied by an angel in the guise of a lover bringing to the poet 'the magical things / only the Night can know' (4).

This pattern of suppressed desire and the nature of these 'magical things' are implicit in the nocturnal vigil 'Invocations', originally published in the *Athenaeum* 10 October 1885, when the eerily human-like voice of the nightingale penetrates the dark, death-like space of the night. Ironically, this cry breaks the silence of the night only to remind the poet of the 'silence of Death' and the 'world of darkness' at the end of life (17). 'The Ideal' explores a similar paradox through the poet's sense that the moon and stars out of reach in the sky are visual symbols of the 'secret, inner shining of my dream', and similarly the poet singing to a beloved in 'Serenade' prays in vain for the lights of the soul—represented by the moon and the stars—to light the darkness within. In 'Remembrance', published in the *Athenaeum* 21 November 1885, the poet hopes that the night will awaken in the loved one memories of a 'vanished love', and through these pleasant thoughts of recovery, the poet escapes the thoughts of death that dominate daily life (5). In each of these nocturnes, the dark space in which the poet aestheticizes love takes the form of what Susan Stewart identifies as 'a veil between worlds' that masks 'the object of fear itself', in this case the poet's fear of the permanent oblivion that is foreshadowed in the night (291). The intangible and allusive promise of happiness emphasizes the gulf between an aesthetic ideal formulated during a night of dreams and realization of that ideal in the light of day.

However, the dark spaces in the night can also be transformed explicitly into moments of contemplation about love experienced as part of a greater reality. Whether looking out of a tent into the void as in 'The Pavilion', or emerging out of a dark, unlit city street to find a beautifully lighted church as in 'Venetian Nocturne', or watching a guiding light radiate from a lighthouse as in 'Calais Beacon', the poetic perspective is defined by an epiphany-like moment that has to do with the integration of self and God occurring during the human experience of love. In each of these nocturnes, the poetic perspective on a world at night is transformed by human feeling into an illumination of the individual as part of a transitional community that links heaven

and earth, and the inclination toward a spiritual existence temporarily fills the void that the harsh light of day consistently reveals. These themes take the form of elusive love and unrequited desire in 'Fire-Flies', a sesta rima poem with rhyming patterns that structure web-like, weaving images into a poetic form itself representative of the 'web of life, the weft of dreams' (7). The inner light of the fire-flies suggests both Promethean insight and Christian faith, which are conflated in the mind of the poet to indicate the paradox of the human condition: like the beautiful, unique, and irreplaceable patterns formed by the fireflies in the dark, the patterns of our lives shift, reconstitute themselves, and, ultimately, expire. In the canzone 'The Feast of St. John', the role of human love in these patterns is recast in terms of the tension between innate prenatal grace associated with John the Baptist's feast on 24 June and the celebrations of young love associated with midsummer; consequently, the cleansing and redemptive rituals of baptism are juxtaposed with the sensual and earthly celebrations of the summer solstice, and the poetic perspective emerges out of the transitional philosophical space between Christian aesthetics and ancient fertility rites, as well as in the transitional moments between night and day.

The cyclical continuity of individual desire and aestheticized love that constitutes the secrets of the night is implicit as well in the circular shape of the garland wreath that provides the conceit developed in the second section of *An Italian Garden*. The epigraph to 'A Garland of Flowers' from the *Vita Nuova and Canzoniere of Dante Alighieri* can be translated literally as 'From blooms of little words, my story has danced', and indeed, the nineteenth-century critic Charles Waddell Chesnutt suggests that Robinson 'has taken airy words and spun of them tissues of airy rhyme' (204-5). However, this particular garland reflects the complex nature of modern love through poetry that contrasts pastoral innocence, lushness, and fertility with the violence inherent in sexual desire. The contrast between the physical delicacy of the flower and its symbolic association with female sexuality underpins even the simplest poetic forms in this section, and in this respect, the paradoxical nature of love aestheticized as a risky, yet compelling element of human existence extends the overall metaphor unifying the sequence. The young girl of 'A Foletta', for instance, is compared through the title of the poem to a small leaf in early spring and is associated not only with 'the flowering almonds' that symbolically offer hope and promise, but also with the 'scarlet tulips' that denote sexuality. Furthermore, Rosina's name is itself a conflation of the affection implicit in the diminutive form and the sexual passion symbolized by the rose. In placing her hand in the poet's hand as requested in the first stanza, Rosina enters into the secret recesses of sexual love, and in making her dreams reality—in letting herself 'cry aloud to-day' what she dared not broach in the dark of night—she confirms her sexual maturity (23). Imagery and allusion in the second verse suggest the de-flowering that will bring the promise to fruition: 'Such a thing you could not pray', reminds the poet, 'dared not dream alone at midnight'. In 'Red May', the colour red, evoking the blood of martyrdom, suggests a parallel thematic thread as, rather than linking the month of May to the more conventional ideals of renewal and rebirth in spring, the colour suggests the broken-hearted poet's life force ebbing away. On the other hand, the inevitable revival of love central to the process of aestheticization is suggested in the title 'A Rifiorita', literally the 'flourishing' of love implied by its physical reminders—the 'flowers in the wall' and the 'flowers on the stone' (24); similarly, in 'Temple Garlands', 'roses of the Past' remain 'always sweet' reminders of past love and, in gracing the doors to a temple deep in the heart, represent sacred and transcendent love. These garlands keep at bay

the 'moth' and 'rust', conventional symbols of disuse, as the wreaths encircle the individual to enclose within the human heart the secret core of desire (30). This desire is made concrete in 'Treasure Song' through an analogy between a miser counting his gold and the poet counting dreams. However, the poet makes this comparison to emphasize the 'useless' nature of this particular treasure, thereby reinforcing the aestheticist claim that treasure is always defined individualistically. The 'delights of dreaming, / so dear, and only seeming' are the poet's private supply of gold (31).

In the garland poems, then, the ironic treatment of love often perverts the conventional poetic representation of desire. For example, in 'Posies', a traditional floral tribute to young love is transformed into a memorial of love lost as the lilacs and columbine, which symbolize sexual innocence and early love, become 'pale' in comparison to the vibrant posy made of crimson peonies given by 'a bolder man' (25). Similarly, in 'Oak and Holly', the symbols of endurance and love in the title are transformed into symbols of degeneracy and failed love in the poem. The oak leaves dry up and fall off, seeming to the poet to 'have no life in them to heal a broken heart', and the perennially green holly leaves have 'no sap beneath the gloss' to sooth an aching heart (32). Throughout 'A Garland of Flowers', the elements of nature's garden that conventionally form the substance of love poetry instead represent painful, unrequited, and lost love, thereby defining the aestheticist moment in terms of the finitude of human love. This idea is developed throughout this metaphorical garden and is emphasized at critical moments, such as in 'To a Rose Dead at Morning' and 'Strewings', when floral symbols are linked explicitly to death to reinforce the prevailing metaphor of a memorial garland marking the end of finite love.

The sixteen sequenced rispetti titled 'Tuscan Cypress' emerge out of a long, popular tradition of peasant poetry that pays particular tribute to the earthly, sexual aesthetic of love. In 'Poliziano's Italian Poetry', John Addington Symonds, to whom Robinson dedicated *The Crowned Hippolytus*, points out that 'the rispetti embody no philosophy of love, no chivalrous religion. They are inspired by Aphrodite Pandemos, and the joys of which they speak are carnal' (180). Through reference to death implicit in the symbolic cypress tree of the title, with its scent evoking sensations of decay, Robinson conflates the cycles of life and death with corresponding cycles in nature. The two three-line Italian stornelli that preface the sequence juxtapose the sea and the cypress tree, symbols of life and death, to suggest the poet's growing sense of the finitude of human love. The three-line stornello is a more concise and condensed form than the eight-line rispetto, and this epigraphic quality appropriately sets the mood for the whole sequence. The poet hopes that the cypress blooms will enlighten and illuminate love that has faded, thereby providing some context for this love in the present. In the second stornello, the ebb and flow of the sea suggests the poet's recurring inclination to view death as a means of escape from the hopelessness of unsustainable desire. Effectively, then, the epigraph establishes the dark mood of the sequence to come.

The dominant symbol of the first rispetto, the moon, establishes the gender ambiguity that prevails throughout the rispetti, for although the ancient association of the moon with woman—the new moon as maiden, the full moon as mother, and the old moon as crone—is implicit in the fact that both moon and woman live in twenty-eight day



cycles, the poet's birth 'neath the streaming moon', located in the shadow side of the masculine sun, casts the poetic voice in an androgynously contemplative tone. In a rhetorical process similar to that of the sonnet, the second stanza of the *rispetto* places the dilemma of the first stanza in specific context, and the 'grey', 'wan' roses in the light of the moon in the responsive second stanza suggest yearning and desire in the cold night. Over the next two *rispetti* the motif of death adds urgency to the poet's tone (35). 'What good in love?' the poet asks in the second *rispetto*, but in the third concludes that love is indeed worthwhile, even though in 'dying day by day' the poet's remembrance of the joy of love fades (36, 37). Over the next seven *rispetti*, the tone is increasingly bleak as metaphors of sown seeds and sea tempests convey the arbitrary and limited potential of human love, and the gender-neutral voice emphasizes the transience and impermanence of all human love. Themes of separation, unrequited love, and death culminate in the seventh *rispetto* as the poet shrugs philosophically: 'When I am dead and I am quite forgot, / What care I if my spirit lives or dies?' To this poet, earthly passion and an existence 'in a cranny of your soul' supersede all ideals of heaven (41). The poet's regret in the eighth *rispetto* that there is no 'home' for love and the *carpe diem* request that begins the ninth *rispetto* signal the poet's desperation manifested in dreams, not only of the exotic places the lovers will visit when the poet is 'well' but also of the 'Indian roses gold and red' that will form the garlands to memorialize the poet in death (42, 43).

The 'turn' in the sequence that marks a poetic shift towards a transcendent state of love occurs in the eleventh *rispetto*, when the poet's plea, 'Tell me a story, dear, that is not true', situates the *rispetti* centrally within the thematic frame of the volume (45). The remaining *rispetti* formulate the text of this 'story', shaped into a fantasy that not only shields the poet from the pain of lost love but also provides for continuance of this love within the context of sorrow at the end of the sequence. This process of aestheticizing sorrow begins in earnest in the twelfth *rispetto* as the poet suppresses memories of love as it once existed. 'Let us forget', the poet pleads twice in the first stanza—forget having to part and forget having been in love. Sexual love is aestheticized as a form of innocence that the poet hopes will be sustainable, as like children, the lovers live 'without to-morrow, without yesterday' (46). This fantasy is shaped more concretely in the thirteenth *rispetto* through an alliterative series of invocations to symbols of escape—seas, ships, sails, and the sky—and in the fourteenth *rispetto* through images of strangulation and suppression as the enduring cypress flower forms a 'crown tight round my brows' and a 'wreath tight round my breast', says the poet (48). In the final two *rispetti* the tone shifts again, and the poet brings the rhetorical process of the sequence to a full-circled close through images of resistance and resolution as the poet transforms unrequited love into an aesthetic act by embracing Sorrow as a lifelong companion. In this way, the poet enters into a new relationship with the beloved, and paralyzing despair is now an enabling awareness of love as a transient feature of human existence.

The Tuscan *rispetto* that serves as an epigraph for the fourth section of *An Italian Garden* not only provides continuity through form in the overarching theme of the aesthetic value of love, but also reaffirms through spring-like birth and winter-like death that acceptance of transience is transformative and empowering. The section is titled 'Songs and Dreams', and the aestheticism implicit in the epigraphic *rispetto* is developed through the duality inherent in the experience of love. This duality is foregrounded in the first poem, 'Tuscan May-Day', through the association of the

month of May not only with the Virgin Mary but also with Artemis, the Greek Goddess of fertility. Likewise, in 'Love Without Wings', consisting of eight 'songs' of varied length, metre, and rhyme, desire is sublimated as love is reshaped to accommodate its transient nature. The title alludes to Byron's 'L'Amitié, Est L'Amour Sans Ailes' or 'friendship is love without his wings', which the poet implicitly concedes through recognition that 'nothing endures we did, nothing we wrought, / nothing we said'; rather, love 'echoes' in dreams to signal its transformation into friendship (58).

Similar themes of transition and transience are developed throughout 'Songs and Dreams' as the poet moves steadily toward the view that love might be satisfactorily experienced in imagined spaces outside an earthly context. This process begins in 'Semitones' with associational emotions positioned like neighbouring keys on a keyboard, the analogy emphasizing the relative nature of all human connections in producing a harmonious existence. The distance from one key to the next is negligible, but it is enough to make the tones distinguishable from one another. In 'Death in the World', the imagined space is heaven, but just as the 'pallid' lilies that spring up from their 'graves' are cursed with the ability to 'remember' their temporality, the 'pale' angels are burdened with memories of earthly life. In 'Elysium', the poet finds peace only when the sorrows of the world have vanished as smoke'. In 'Lovers', love is presented as possible only in an imagined space 'above the clouds and far enough' away from the challenges of earth, with only the 'sweet angels' as witnesses (66). In other 'Songs and Dreams', such as 'Alternatives' and 'Princesses', the disparity between desire and experience is the emotional 'space' in which human love evolves. 'Alternatives' suggests that in this space an imperfect but sustainable aesthetic of love is possible only as long as lovers respect the limitations of human love. 'Should I love you more / If you understood me?' the poet asks, and the answer is a clear 'Nay' to this sweeping conditional. The two short stanzas of 'Princesses' more pessimistically undermine chivalric love and its implicit capacity to transcend worldly desire in their suggestion that it is not the lover sent off to face dangers as proof of his merit who shows true courage, but the lady who poses the challenge. The poetic voice could not ask a lover 'for the lightest task' for fear that the modern-day knight 'may not love' enough to complete it (65). The combination of the three line stornello and the roundelay strambotto enables Robinson to develop a series of compressed images in 'Stornelli and Strambotti', first published in the *Athenaeum* 4 March 1882, to convey the poet's reluctance to experience—and lose—love again; however, in the convention of the roundelay, the final stornello comes full circle with an address to the 'flower of a flower' as the poet revels in the secret delight of imagined love not yet experienced, and the circular form itself represents the ever-renewing desire for enduring love (64). In other poems, Robinson uses allegory to explore the process of aestheticizing human experience, whether the poet experiences the world vicariously through the art of storytelling as in 'Cecilia's Homecoming' or whether the enduring powers of nature are endorsed through the prevention of the metaphorical rape of the tree nymph as in 'Dryads'. The juxtaposition of verses into a variation of the sonnet in 'A Rose' emphasizes the complexities of love, as the rose representing sexual desire is gendered and objectified through language, and the object of desire becomes a song that the lover feels inadequate to sing. The process of desire, failure, and regret that constitute an aestheticist perspective situates 'Songs and Dreams' as the turning point of the volume.

The epigraph to the final section of *An Italian Garden* is taken from Baudelaire's 'Evening Harmony' and links 'Vestigia' thematically to 'Nocturnes' within the aesthetic of nocturnal intimacy and secret memories. Baudelaire suggests that a 'tender heart' facing the 'black oblivion' of despair might be given new life by vestiges of 'bygone light'. Although remembered experience illuminates the present, it is in collective human history that we locate the 'bright past' to resuscitate the beauty of life, thereby reinforcing the power of individual desire within the complex and diverse social groupings of our world (75). The poems in 'Vestiges' deal with aestheticist themes—with memory, with the past implicit in the present, and with transience and transition as defining features of human existence. 'Rosa Rosarum' (Rose of Roses) establishes the aestheticist perspective of this section through passionate and sensual transcendent love represented by the rose. The poet calls on the loved one to reveal 'the secret of thy heart' and 'the secret of thy life'. These secrets, the poet promises, will remain buried within, just like the symbolic rose that they have tossed into a deep well. The illicit nature of the love the two share evokes Baudelaire in the secrecy of this gesture to ensure that 'never more the rose shall rise / to shame us' (77). However, the passion hidden forever in the poet's heart that is signalled by 'a sudden dawn of red' from deep in the well also suggests the continued influence of this vestige on later experiences of human love (78). Similarly, in 'An Oasis', the poet's 'soul' is represented as a metaphorical 'well' in the 'desert waste' of love. The irony of the poem's title is indicated by the non-reflective quality of the well-water, as though in absorbing this tremendous but transient love, the water has lost its reflective powers, and the tight sonnet redouble rhyme scheme emphasizes the painful constraint of the poet's expression of a love that is non-reflective and unrequited. The conditional phrasing that introduces the water metaphor in the partner poem 'Torrents' suggests that love is subject to the temporal realities of life, since the poet, whose springs 'have never yet begun to flow', is fixed on a course parallel to one whose springs 'ran dry so long ago' (80). Therefore, these parallel courses of love are out of phase and will never meet. In all three poems, the water metaphor so often related to health and vitality conveys instead failure and hopelessness, and these negative ideas are implicitly of immeasurable contemplative value.

Metaphors developed through imagery of place in landscape poems also pervert nature images to point to the limitations of the human experience of love and aestheticize the pain of these limitations in terms of infinite yearning and desire. 'Aubade Triste', for instance, following the convention of the aubade, traces the pain of lovers forced to separate at dawn to maintain the secrecy of their love, and the frozen image of the messenger of the sea left silenced and impotent in 'Castello' suggests the poet's abandonment. In 'A Classic Landscape', nature extends memory into an archetypal faculty that links the poet to poets of the past, and in both 'Poplar Leaves' and 'Spring Under Cypresses', similar vestiges are triggered by associational sensory appeals that are directly related to the trees: the poplar is associated with endurance and courage and the cypress with death, mourning, and grief. Read together, these poems convey a paradox that defines the human condition as simultaneous yearning for transcendence and fear of the loss of earthly love in death through which transcendence might occur. In 'Spring Under Cypresses', which appeared in the *Athenaeum* on 16 May 1885, the specific juxtaposition of the tree of death with the renewal associated with spring is a reminder of the cycles of life. The bird that sings in isolation in this poem is echoed in musical interludes in three poems

that follow. In 'Campiello Barbero', a pivotal moment occurs when the past meets the present in a girl's song and in 'Music' the moment occurs in the transitional space between sleeping and waking as the poet struggles unsuccessfully to recall an exquisite tune that vanishes as consciousness returns. This transitional moment is reshaped in 'Song' into the seconds between living and dying, when only the vestiges of love remain and recovering the experience of love is as futile as the dying person's attempts to breathe in the scent of the rose. The conventional expression of desire associated with the sonnet form is replaced in both 'Sonnet' and 'Art and Life' with hopelessness and self-denigration. 'Sonnet' analogizes life to a road leading inexorably toward Death, vivid imagery in the octave conveying the dry, parched quality of the poet's life restricted to the 'dusty purlieus'—the unfertile strip of land along the edge of the forest; the transitional space in 'Art and Life' hinges on the intricate relationship between aesthetic representation and reality, for in picking living, developing blooms to transform them into static representations, the poet has not only denigrated the beauty of spring but has also forfeited the harvest fruit.

'In Memoriam: Dante Gabriel Rossetti' is an elegy in the musical Italian madrigal form that pays tribute to the poet and artist whose ekphrastic work explores trans-disciplinary representations of human love.<sup>4</sup> Rossetti's May birth links him to Mary and to conventional representations of rebirth and renewal in the natural world; his Easter death links him to the Resurrection and suggests hope for a transcendent life after death. The unnatural silence that seems to have fallen on the earth with Rossetti's death is underscored by the songbirds that fill the air with joyful tunes, suggesting to the poet that Rossetti is singing the 'sweeter note . . . that sounds in Paradise' (83). Robinson situates this moment of transcendence as Rossetti's escape from a difficult and unhappy life, urging Rossetti's soul-companions to rejoice now that he is among them and Rossetti himself to participate in singing with the 'eternal lyre' for which he seems to have been destined (94). The two sestinas that conclude *An Italian Garden* finalize the aestheticization of the transient process of life. Construction of this twelfth-century form is made extremely challenging by word patterns: the same set of six words end each line but appear in different lines in each of the six stanzas of six lines each; the closing tercet makes a total of thirty-nine lines. The overall effect of this form is to emphasize containment and restriction; in this respect, the sestina is appropriate for the aestheticist themes of isolation, impermanence, and death. In 'Personality', the abstract human quality denoted in the title is allegorized as high garden walls between which our souls progress, separated from one another with nothing but emptiness stretching before and behind. Although we may yearn to break through the walls in pursuit of human love, we remain imprisoned within our own 'walled' personalities unless we find a 'larger Soul' and experience perfect unity in a mystical presence that is 'enthroned in front / Of Time, beyond the world's remotest walls' (99). 'Pulvis et Umbra' conveys a similar sense of isolation and finitude in its allusion to Horace's 'dust and shadow'. Experiencing life as a 'shadow' among other 'shades', with death the only certainty in life, the poet existentially yearns to 'grasp it all' (100, 101). However, as the tercet confirms, the only insight the poet gains into 'it all' is that human beings are bound to live in uncertainty among the shadows. The sestinas reinforce the fragmentary nature of our insight into the finite and transient nature of the human condition.

Robinson's story of transient love is 'true' to the human tendency to yearn for endurance in a world defined by impermanence. The poetic voice of *An Italian*

*Garden* aestheticizes the isolation inherent in the philosophy of individualism through this intimate expression of androgynous desire that transcends gender, time, and place. Robinson depends on lyrical Italian forms, with their rich heritage as love poetry, to shift her perspective from the aestheticist socialism of *The New Arcadia* to the aestheticist individualism of *An Italian Garden* in order to write about love marked by unrequited desire and failed passion—love dissociated from gender restrictions. She poeticizes Pater's anxiety related, as he writes, to our 'sense of the splendour of our experience and of its awful brevity' (189). Moreover, in its expression of conflicted feelings about love, desire, and death that blur gender boundaries and gendered expectations, *An Italian Garden* reflects in essence Robinson's own trajectory of love in its emphasis on the ironic beauty of transience, impermanence, and instability that characterize love within the individual heart.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> References to the original edition of *An Italian Garden* are indicated parenthetically by page number, since the volume was published without line numbers.

<sup>2</sup> Evangelista explains, 'the uneasy alliance between aestheticism and archaeology is a topic that would preoccupy Lee throughout her career'.

<sup>3</sup> More recently, Ben Glaser has expanded the study of Robinson's integration of classical metre into lyric forms. See Glaser, Ben. 'Polymetrical Dissonance: Tennyson, A. Mary F. Robinson, and Classical Meter'. *Victorian Poetry* 49.2 (2011): 199-216.

<sup>4</sup> This lyrical elegy perhaps has its genesis in the lengthy obituary on Rossetti that Robinson contributed to *Harper's New Monthly Magazine*. See 'Dante Gabriel Rossetti', *Harper's New Monthly Magazine* 65 (1882): 691-701.

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